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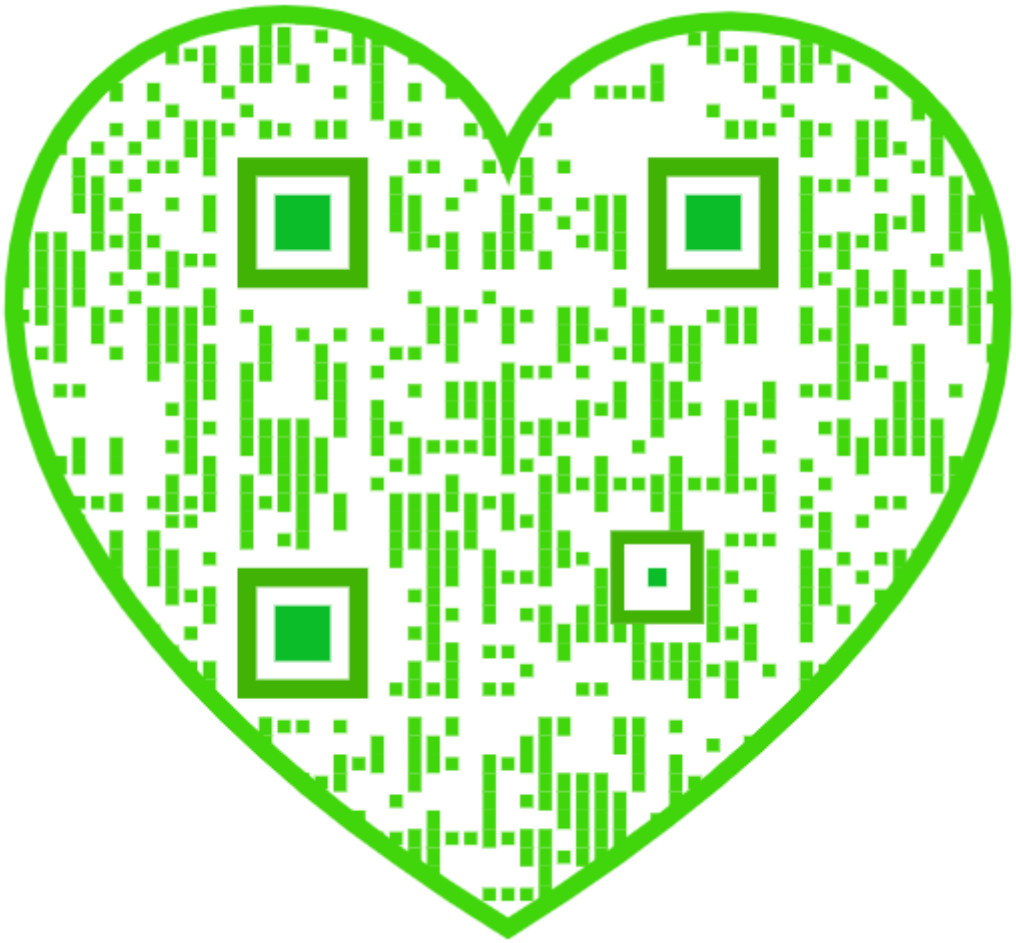
Dream-Visions
of
Christmastide



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CHRISTMASTIDE

DREAM-VISIONS

OF

CHRISTMASTIDE

BY

JOSEPH MATTHIAS JONES

"MEMORY OF THE FAR-GONE YEARS HATH BLOWN UPON ME LIKE THE BREATH OF PASSION, AND SAILED ME INTO A SEA OF VAST DREAMS, WHEREBY EACH WAVE IS AT ONCE A VISION AND A MELODY."

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BY
JOSEPH MATTHIAS JONES.

"The moss-stained marble rests
O'er the lips my lips pressed
In their bloom;
And the names I loved to hear
Have been carved for many a year
On the tomb."

Consecration

GRATEFUL FOR ALL THY TENDER MINISTRY TO ME, IN SHADE AND SHINE, IN GRIEF AND GLADNESS, I CONSECRATE THESE LEAVES WITH TEARS: ENTWINE THEM WITH LILIES FROM THE GARDEN OF MY GRATITUDE, AND LOVINGLY SING TO THEE, SWEET PRINCE OF PEACE.

Christmastide.

Dreaming, we float on Memory's wings to realms of far-gone years.

Voice after voice: vision after vision pass before us. Softly the dusk falls: night crowds on us; the fire-glow fades to dull, gray ashes: curtains are drawn; the bed

invites: sleep gently tips eyelids and wooes to rest—and to dreams.

Between the eveningtide and the morningtide one traveler has invaded the homes of Christendom. Ah, Santa, thou art a generous Prince, for thy trade is to give and make happy. May thy smiling face never grow older; thy snowy beard less glossy; thy fat hands less cunning;

thy storehouse less full. May thy whip have a golden stock and a silken lash to speed thy gallant reindeer to expectant hearts. We see thy form and face only through the dream-shadows, but we hear the echoes of thy sleigh and the merry song of thy bells, and the old feel young again, the strong stronger still, and childhood leaps for joy.

Thy coming makes this the day of days for the young; the time when they taste the sweetest sweets of all the year.

A Dream Vision rises, and we are borne back through the dead centuries. A star has risen and its wondrous light floods the land. The wise men catch its beams and quickly mount and speed over the

Syrian plain. Awe-struck and silent they journey through the still hours of the night, with eyes fixed on the star whose light paints in colors of ravishing beauty the fair face of the gentle Virgin-Mother, on whose blue veined, lily-white bosom nestles The Babe.

Another Dream-Vision bears us to the Christmastides of the long-ago,

ere youth had closed his golden door —the time when "we waded knee-deep in the stream of Memory that flowed from the land of youth— when the prophet-dreams of youth sang only of joy and victory." The firelight flings quivering warmth about our chamber, and in pensive, saddened mood we recall the vanished past. We enter the old home

—now, alas! crumbling to decay and the home of strangers—where we companied with adored ones whose voices have long been hushed in dreamless sleep O! the charms of that home, and the tenderness of affection that were ours in "the days that are no more." Again we sip sweets from lips and feel the warm embrace of those who were the

idols of our hearts. We stand once more in the hallowed shrine—the mother's room—and suspended from the mantelpiece over the dear old fireplace—the bright wood fire gave out its soft glow and comfort in those faraway sweet, sweet days—we see the row of stockings, and then we catch the echoes of shout and laugh of little brothers and sis-

ters as they tumble rosy and happy out of bed; and then a mist gathers upon our eyes to blur the vision as we remember that some of those precious little ones were taken from our home, and our broken hearts by the call of the Christmas-Born, and are sleeping yonder in the Voiceless City. If, then, our hearts be saddened by the remembrance of the

vanished days that were fraught with melancholy partings, they are also softened and purified, and all coldness and selfishness are banished from our thoughts on this holy Christmas day. Pity and compassion—sweet and gentle graces—reign supreme, while Charity stands erect in peerless beauty, with no stain upon her spotless robes, and we bend

to her beneficent commands ; queen of graces, linking the heart of Him the Good to the heart of Man the Generous. To-day we are lost to self, and forget our own deep griefs and find our chiefest happiness in ministering to those more wretched than ourselves. "We feel the sense of obligation and of wrong—pity for those who toil and weep—tears

for the imprisoned and despised—love for the noble living--reverence for the generous dead—and in heart the rapture of a high resolve."

The Voice again sings to the heart bidding a remembrance that the year now nearing its close has been rough to many; the sky of hope obscured: the soul's light clouded by bitter griefs. Then we catch the

soft notes of His voice—"Be merciful," and we turn with succoring hand, and cheery voice, and sunny smile to His desolate ones; to the widow in her abode of poverty, with the shadow of despair her constant companion; to the man once vigorous, now wasting under fatal malady, with no ray of hope to cheer his path to the tomb; to

the crippled child—ah this is the sad picture—lying in orphan ward of hospital, about whose pale, sweet face few smiles have played, yet beautiful withal, the Great Artist having tinted that face with the supreme touch that melts and wins the beholder's heart—Innocence. We look through tears upon the little sufferer—august in her purity and

helplessness—with tenderest compassion. "What hand but would a loving garland cull for one so frail and beautiful."

On this holy day the Voice bids us comfort and cheer those bending under the stroke of some great agony. "While we may not drown grief in oblivion, we can dignify it by hope; while we may not calm

the despairing soul by pointing it down to the grave of resignation, we can turn it from the darkness of the tomb to the brightness of the stars."

"He who has not felt in his soul the strong throbs of Love and Grief, and has not seen the things of this life, and read the hearts of men and women by this double light, has seen

but little, and knows but little of the human heart."

To-day we recall those in homes where sunbeams enter not; a noble father agonizes over his wayward, wandering son; a sweet and loving mother mourns a once pure and affectionate daughter—now lost in the city's dens of shame. Their wretchedness being all the more

intensified as they see smiles and happiness in other homes; and as these broken-hearted ones move in loneliness of soul, Compassion turns us to weep with them—what more can we do?

"Touched by Compassion's hand, the wayside weed
Becomes a fragrant flower! the lowliest reed
Beside the stream is clothed with beauty.
It sings of love, its flame illumes
The darkest of lone cottage rooms."

And thus the Dream-Visions and

Dream-Voices come to us, on the day fraught with so much mingled joy and sorrow, sunshine and shadow; we bow in mournful revery—for our thoughts are of our scattered living and our gathered dead—and then a stir in the graveyard of Memory, the slumbering thoughts rise again, and the full omnipotence of affection returns to the heart and

streams out from the beautiful faces of those we loved—and have lost awhile. The one supreme and beauteous face that rises out of the crystal depths of Memory, before which we linger with rapturous joy and sadness, the face of the one of all the world the sweetest and best beloved, is that of the patient and gentle mother, who watched our

babyhood and childhood and youth with angelic tenderness, and from the far-away Valley of Bliss float to us the echoes of her voice, in melody sweeter than the sweetest carol of bird, and as we look up toward the Celestial Country, her bright home, and ours to be, we recall her radiant presence as she moved among us, and wonder how it was

possible for us to have survived our grief when she said her last farewell and took her flight; and then "through the hallowed glory of the past more precious seems that face, more beautiful, more divinely fair, as we decay, as we grow old, more dearly loved for the tender memories it brings." Once more we see the form and face of the venerable

father who wrought for us in his days of manly vigor; and now there troop before us a cluster of darling little ones, brothers and sisters, with whom we walked in the cool of the evening of life's early dawn. Another picture of noble beauty and dignity rises in view—the sweet faced beloved old grandmother, sitting in the corner of the old family room.

O! the voices crowd upon us, some echoing happy marriage bells, others the mournful funeral dirge. Only at Christmastide do we hold the talisman which brings the perished years back to us; then it is we remember the sweets and blessings of life, and we strive to banish sad thoughts as our lips move in prayer—we pour out our gratitude

to the Great Giver for the gift of Christian parents, a Christian home, and many Christian friends; nor do we forget to fervently plead for all mankind—that He will send the Christian teacher to the whole human race to tell of the gentle Nazarene.

In the town, as in the country, this holy day flings beams of gladness.

The first snowflake falls, then others, and soon the earth turns white. The jingle of sleigh bells cuts through the frosty air; merry notes ring out from pedestrians hurrying along the streets, bearing beautiful things for loved ones at home. The bright green Christmas tree is planted in the biggest room, and it yields a wonderful harvest for the little folk

in a single night. In the country home are gathered the kin of generations—ah, what picture so lovely as that of the Christmas reunion in the old country home! The big wood fire burns with a proud and conscious glow, as it flings a light soft as a dream of peace about the forms and faces gathered there. The rooms and halls are gracefully festooned

with masses of evergreen and holly bright with berries; white roses and violets fill the air with grateful odors; then come apples and nuts and sparkling cider—brewed from blushing and golden fruit from the old orchard; faces glow; hearts are happy; the wild racket of the little ones makes the walls ring again; story-telling follows, and from the

lips of the patriarch of this happy circle comes a story whose sweet lesson touches every heart:

The Beautiful Hand.

There was a dispute among three ladies as to which had the most beautiful hand. One sat by a stream and dipped her hand into the water and held it up; another plucked strawberries until the ends of her fingers were pink; and another gathered violets

until her hands were fragrant. An old and haggard woman passing by, asked:

"Who will give me a gift, for I am poor?"

All three denied her; but another who sat near, unwashed in the stream, unstained with fruit, unadorned with flowers, gave her a little gift, and satisfied the poor woman. And then she asked them what was the dispute. They told her, and lifted up before her their beautiful hands.

"Beautiful, indeed," said she when she saw them. But when they asked her which was the most beautiful, she said:

"It is not the hand that is washed in the brook; it is not the hand that is tipped with red; it is not the hand that is garlanded with fragrant flowers —but the hand that gives to the poor is the most beautiful!"

As she said these words her wrinkles fled, her staff was thrown away, and

she stood before them an angel from heaven, with authority to decide the question in dispute. And that decision has stood the test of all time.

Outside the wind howls and sends the snow in drifts against the window panes; the cattle are snugly housed; the rabbits are warm under the bushes; the birds are sheltered under the eaves of the barn; and

so, without and within the old country home all is joy and peace and comfort.

Once more the echoes of Christmastide come to us from a city vision, and His sweet and pleading voice is heard:

"There is a doorway in a narrow street,
And close beside that door a broken stair,
And then a low, dark room;
The room is bare,
But in a corner lies

A worn-out form upon a hard straw bed--
No pillow underneath the aching head—
A face grown wan with suffering, and a hand
Scarce strong enough to reach the small dry crust
That lies upon the chair.
Go in, for I am there;
I have been waiting wearily in that cold room--
Waiting long, lonely hours--
Waiting for thee to come
And minister to my suffering one."

And now we catch another Dream Voice which whispers of our failures and our triumphs in life; of words and acts of ours that gave pain to

others, and we beg our Father to pardon us and to heal the wounds we made; we recall words and acts of others that put sorrow in our heart, and we invoke a Father's blessing upon them, and beg Him to forgive them and give us back their friendship and their love. We remember—remember but to bless—those who came to us with loving

succor when pain and grief swept their billows over us. We also see rising before us the sad eyes, patient faces, wasting forms, of those to whom we gave the soft word, the tender touch, the sunny smile, the cup of strength, when their griefs bore heaviest; and then we resolve to succor and cheer other suffering, burdened souls—"not to keep the

alabaster box of love and tenderness sealed up until our friends are dead, but to put some sweetness in their lives; to speak the cheering words while their ears can hear them, that their hearts can be thrilled and made happy by them; the kind things we are wont to say when they are dead and gone we we will say now, before they go; the

flowers we mean to send to their coffins we will send now, to brighten and scenten their homes before they leave them—that they may behold their beauty and inhale their fragrance, remembering that flowers on the coffin are but seen by the living, their perfume only grateful to the living, that they put no sweetness in the nostrils of the dead."

"We wound the living heart, yet clip the briers
From roses that we lay in pulseless hands;
We build for frozen hearts our tardy fires,
And pour love's chalice upon graveyard sands."

Still dreaming, I was borne to a palatial home. It was the sweet spring-time, and without nature spread her beauties and her glories. Tender, plaintive notes of forest warblers quivered on the golden air. Within, wealth and culture graced

with art's choicest treasures: through stained windows streamed a mellow light, while sweetest and fairest flowers lent wondrous beauty and fragrance to the scene. In a costly casket, embellished with solid silver trappings, lay one that had just reached manhood's proudest stage: who had quaffed deeply at the world's fountain of pleasures and

defilements: reared in a home of luxury by those who valued the glittering things of time above the fadeless things of eternity. As I looked upon the frozen face, classic in its manly beauty, I heard a cry that chilled my blood, such a cry as can come alone from a heart tortured by remorse and bereft of hope, and then turned and met the glare of a

woman's eye—the proud and worldly mother of the dead—and as I stood under the shadow of the saddened scene, in the presence of the mated mysteries, Life and Death, there swept athwart the chamber in letters black as the raven's wing the appalling sentence—

DIED WITHOUT HOPE—LOST!

—and as these words vanished from

my view, there smote upon my ear the mournful toll of distant bell, and then a darkness, dense and awful, drowned my vision and my dream.

Again I dreamed and was borne to a modest cottage home, whose humble dwellers had often felt the pinch of poverty. Without, the air was laden with fragrance of simple flowers, and doors and windows

wreathed with trailing vines. Within, all was plain, but clean and sweet. Death had entered here, and in a wooden coffin lay a manly youth, the seal of peaceful repose stamped upon his marble face. As I stood in the shaded light of this hushed and solemn scene, my ear caught a woman's soft, low cry—the cry of the gentle Christian mother of the dead—and

as I met her gaze I read in eye and on face that sorrow's wound had been touched with healing by the Master's hand; and then, in letters of radiant light, there moved across the room the words of comfort—

DIED IN THE FAITH—SAVED!

—and from the old church over the way there came strains of triumphant song, and there above the dark-

ness of the dead shone Hope's bright star, and then I awoke to find my chamber suffused with soft beams of the morning sun.

Back of the hand that writes these lines lies a heart that throbs in tender, loyal love for childhood and youth. As I stand in the mellow autumn of my life, at that hour "When night is not yet, and day is no more," and

look back over the traveled way, recounting the history of one sad and suffering heart, and there come in review before tear-blurred eyes the multiform scenes in the pilgrimage of one wan and weary life; scenes at once the saddest and sweetest; the most joyous and the most mournful; and remember what childhood and youth must encounter as the years

crowd on toward manhood—much, oh, so much, that will wring tears from the eye, and pierce the soul with agony—the warmest compassion of my heart sweeps to you in flood-tide fullness, oh, innocent and adorable childhood. Would that I could compass you as with a shield, and hedge you from the dangers and impurities that will woo you from

duty's path. Would that I might impress you with the truth—The cleaner the living the braver the heart, the braver the heart the nobler the life, the nobler the life the whiter the soul, the whiter the soul the more peaceful the end when the curtain rolls down for the last time on earth.

Another Vision rises, and we are carried back through the ages to a

scene of barbarous cruelty and Christian martyrdom. Imperial Rome has turned her populace to the Colosseum, which stands in its pristine splendor. Pillars and arches of the mighty structure are adorned with rich colors of the Orient; the cope of the balustrade mounted with parian and bronze statues of rulers, philosophers, warriors, poets, orators and

masters of art. Richly embroidered awnings protect the royal quarters from the mid-day heat: burnished shields and spears of warrior legions reflect back the brilliant light, and golden eagles, kissed by the soft Italian sun, are borne aloft like glories in the air. A Christian convert, a Greek maiden, torn from her home by Rome's mail-clad hand, enters

the arena. Against her pearl-white brow tenderly beats the breath of the Eternal Morning. Her clear eye of faith penetrates the veil and catches a glimpse of the green pastures and still waters in the land of Jerusalem the Golden.

Modest, yet courageous, supported by a strength born of saintly devotion, she presents a picture of classic

and pathetic beauty, ready to yield her sweet young life, that she may proclaim her love for Him who lay in Bethlehem's Manger. Bolts are thrown back, a trumpet signals, and with hungry growl the wild beasts spring in; flesh is mangled, blood flows, bones are crushed, and a pure soul is white-winged for flight to Paradise.

We marvel—and pity as we marvel—that any can refuse belief in Him for whom the gentle maiden died. We wonder how any human heart can fix its faith and affection solely on finite things in a world that contains no satisfying portion for the soul: where the blighting forces of sin touch but to consume. The Voice whispers that when the body and

soul come to part company at the portal of the tomb, happy only will be he who has anchored his hope on the Great Martyr; whose riches await him in the Celestial Beyond. Only such a one will find cheer in the hour when he draws nearer and nearer to the calm Sea of Eternity. The Voice sings of a purer, gladder stream than any that flows from the

fountain source of wealth and honors and the fading things of earth—a stream that rises in the soul of Faith and glides gently on to Heaven's Crystal Waters.

And now, as we sit alone in our silent chamber, the fire glow grows paler and paler and then fades away; the faithful old clock ticks measurement to the fast dying hours of

the blessed Christmastide; Memory weaves the tangled threads of the past into dream-pictures; the perished years float back to us, freighted with the dark and the bright, the visions and voices grow sadder and sweeter, and more ineffably tender and radiant and holy; before our sweeping and earnest gaze lies spread out the wide domain of all our wanderings, from

the warm white dawn of the morningtide—the sun kissing the silken curls of childhood, to the gray dusk of eventide—the shadows of night falling over the silver locks of age.

With loving gratitude we remember the countless blessings which have come to us from the Father's hand; First and before all and above all, the holy, gentle child of His heart;

He whose coming made human life and liberty securer; the home-life dearer and sweeter; the hearts of men and women purer, truer, braver; the star of hope shine brighter.

The wonderful depths of motherly love; the marvelous sweetness of wifely devotion; the fragrant kiss of the little child and the little child's happy prattle; the entrancing beau-

ties of nature—her peaceful valleys, quiet woodlands, lofty mountains, crystal waters, the fresh green of spring, the rich glories of summer, the mellow splendors of autumn, the joys of winter's Christmas cheer; the journeys made amid scenes of exceeding beauty by day and under glories of bending skies by night; the enchantments of literature, and

music, and art; the thrill of ecstasy born of the friendship of the good and true, the brave and noble among men and women: If these be links in the chain that binds us to this life, making it sweet betimes, how often have the links been torn asunder and the chain lain broken at our feet!

Mournfully we recall the rugged steps and thorny paths; the weary

marches through stress and storm, sacrifice and pain; ceaseless toil palsying and numbing the hand's cunning, and grief's tears burning and dimming the eye's vision; the hurtling thrusts of the blade of adversity; the combats with manifold temptations; the cruel frown of the friend who counted our thoughtless error of the head as an intentional

wrong of the heart; the temples of sadness entered through portals draped with mourning; the fountain of tears in which we bathed; the frosts that fell about our home, chilling the tender bud and withering the lovely flower—sealing the lips of the child and closing the eyes of the mother, leaving us alone in the dark chamber with silence and with death, and our

desolate soul to wander ever after through rayless night.

With the shadows growing more ominous as the years crowd on, the lonely soul crying out "Why linger amid the glooms here, when splendid lights invite you yonder?" the eye looks through the window of its Faith, toward the home where

the dew of youth ever lingers on the cheek; the radiance of immortality lights the brow; where tears are unknown; where no blur falls on the rose, no blight on the lily, no chill deadens the violet's perfume; where strife and wrath, pain nor sickness ever come; where no hurtful thing ever enters; where voices are for-

ever sweet and faces forever fair; where the touch of imperishable loveliness rests upon all.

Being hard pressed in the battle, wan and weary, tired of feet and wounded in heart, storm-tossed and far from home, with earth's stains upon our garments and its sorrows surging to our soul, we yearn for the White Land of Peace, where we may

look into those tender eyes that closed on the cross: lay our tired hand in the dear hand that was pierced for us: listen to the melody of that voice that echoed charity, compassion, healing and peace through the valleys, across the plains, over the hills and across the waters of Palestine; and there join the loved of our heart, and

hand in hand with them, wander along the quiet waters, and through the perfumed pastures as long as eternity, resting, betimes, beneath the soft shade of the Tree of Life, and find that tranquil repose for the soul we here have sought for, striven for, yearned for in vain; and as the Dream takes wing and bears us toward white hands that are seen

beckoning us home, our listening ears catch words, in accents of melting tenderness,

"SAD AND WEARY OF EARTH
COME TO ME AND REST."

As the echos of these restful, comforting words die softly away, my dream is broken, and I awake to meet a flood of golden light

that flashes across the snow-drifts, through my window, into my chamber, and behold it is

CHRISTMAS MORNING.

TO THEE,

O SWEET READER,

I REVEAL THE SECRETS OF

MY HEART--

ITS SADNESS, ITS LONGINGS AND ITS FAITH.

I AM THY FRIEND!

ART THOU MY FRIEND?

IF THOU ART

GENTLY I LAY MY HAND IN THY HAND,

POUR THE LOVE OF MY HEART

INTO THY HEART,

AND TENDERLY BID THEE

FAREWELL.

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